

# **Public Hearing & Written Submission Review of Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport**

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## Introduction

This written submission is based on the PowerPoint presentation and commentary that I provided at the Public Hearing on 19 July 2007, Northcott, Parramatta. There are a number of additions to the written submission that were not in the presentation. The most notable of the additions in this written submission are the market estimates for accessible tourism and appendices of a relevant thesis, research agenda and refereed conference paper that have implications for the area. The areas covered with in the submission include:

- A. The Good, the Bad & the Ugly
- B. Review oversight of cost of participation
- C. Paratransit systems
- D. Taxi design
- E. Wheelchair footprint research
- F. Tourism
- G. Charter services
- H. Lack of systematic inclusion of benefits
- I. Service provision requirements
- J. General cost inequities

### A. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

#### The Good

- Sydney Ferries (about the same)
- Sydney light rail (an example of infrastructure and service)
- Low floor accessible buses (where introduced public and private)
- Increased numbers of accessible taxis
- Increasing numbers of accessible railway stations

#### The Bad and the Ugly

- Airlines (gone backwards see attached paper presented to US Travel and Tourism Research Association Conference in June 2007)
- Coaches (no improvement)
- Charter operators (why excluded?)
- Infrastructure (lags behind stock provision)
- Research (nonexistent or not released)
- Compliance/Policing (the stick is needed as much as the carrot)
- Lack of consistency in scheduling and communication of timetabling of low floor accessible buses

## B. Review oversight of cost of participation

- The scope of the review should have offset the material costs of attending rather than just allowing access:  
In undertaking the Review, the consultant will:
  - Facilitate participation by people with disability by ensuring that any meeting for the purpose of the Review is held at an accessible venue and that documentation and information distributed during the Review are available in alternative formats (The Allen Consulting Group May 2007:19).
- This omission failed to take into account the material hardship faced by people with disabilities as a group and compounded by the lack of an accessible public transport system.
- Did the consultants and the government officers have their cost of travel met for working on the review?
- Why wasn't consideration made for the cost of participation for those who are economically disadvantaged?
- This is an example of the Commonwealth government not materially supporting people with disabilities to participate in all areas of citizenship.

## C. Paratransit Systems

- The subsidized cost of these systems has not increased with the cost of living
- Recognition that the subsidy in NSW has not increased since its inception
- Fares have regularly gone up
- Subsidies have not
- People with disabilities using the system in 1981 have relatively more subsidy than PWD in 2007
- Quite simply you cannot travel as far as you previously were unable to for the \$30 subsidy
- The individual has had to finance the gap between the subsidy and the real cost of traveling or not participate
- Inequity in the subsidy between states
- Inequity in access to paratransit systems from region to region (Newcastle 6)
- Response time...improving but inconsistently frustrating

## D. Taxi design

- Taxis are currently being approved that do not comply to the disability standard
- This is a poor outcome for both people with disabilities and the taxi operator who thinks that they are getting an accessible taxi that will accommodate all wheelchair users
- Length of tray
- Head clearance
- Retractable lap sash seat belts – are we the only group of consumers not to be guaranteed our safety and comfort in taxis through the provision of retractable lap sash seat belts?
- If the internal dimensions do not allow a standard wheelchair user access then the disability standard is not fulfilling spirit and intent of the DDA

- Visibility – are we the only group of consumers not to be allowed to see where we are traveling?

## E. Wheelchair Footprint Research

- The whole system of the A80 wheelchair footprint is based on research with questionable validity and reliability
- Future trends in wheelchair design, increased scooter use and the ageing of the population will further make a mockery of this dimension
- This will create a competitive disadvantage both domestically and internationally
- I call this the *Las Vegas effect* where the baby boomers have a higher expectation for continued community participation than previous generations of older people. Las Vegas is a city where the effects of this are already being seen with the proportion of scooter users being a higher than the norm due to the city's tourist role, climate and destination for retirees.
- The ABCB commissioned research on the wheelchair footprint but never released the research results. Why?
- Why has no further research been commissioned by the Attorney General's Department, the ABCB, Standards Australia or other responsible bodies such as the Taxi Council?
- This would provide a foundation on which to build an equitable society

## F. Tourism

### Limousines, hire cars and charter boats

Limousines, hire cars and charter boats have been exempted from the operation of the Transport Standards (refer s 1.12). This decision was based on the view that these are pre-booked and unique services and, at least in some cases, it is unlikely that the service they provide is a 'public transport service' for the purposes of the Transport Standards (as defined in s 1.23).

- Creates a significant competitive disadvantage for tourism
  - Ageing of the population in all major inbound markets
  - Segregated service provision
  - Reduction in unique Australian experiences
- The exclusion from the DDA appears in contradiction to the Commonwealth Tourism White Paper (2004), which identified accessible tourism as a niche

## G. Coach & Charter services

- Charter services should not have been exempted from the Transport Standards. Exclusion places people requiring accessible tourism experiences at a significant disadvantage to nondisabled tourists. Experiences of Australian tourists with disabilities have been adequately documented in Darcy (2004) (See Appendix 1)
- Incredibly important to obtaining a quintessential experience
- Sense of place
- Coffs Harbour without the bananas...

- Day trips
- Major coach companies
- Small niche operators
- The business case can be made for cruise ship operators who have put on new vessels and have had significant increase in patronage  
Darcy, S., Cameron, B., Packer, T., & Pegg, S. (2008 forthcoming). *Business case studies of accessible tourism*. Brisbane: Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre.
- the case for people with disabilities is clear-cut as shown in case study 1

**Case Study 1: Comparative Cost and Outcomes from a Day Trip to the Blue Mountains**

**A. AAT Kings**

- \$116
- Visit the award-winning Featherdale Wildlife Park - pat a cuddly koala.
- See our amazing Australian animals including koalas, kangaroos, crocodiles.
- Enjoy fantastic photo opportunities and the chance to feed and interact with the animals!
- Relax on a gentle bushwalk at Govetts Leap - breathtaking views from the lookouts.
- See the historic township of Katoomba.
- Take in the spectacular scenery of Jamison and Megalong Valleys.
- Take a ride on the world's steepest railway (own expense).
- See the Three Sisters rock formation.
- Discover the delightful village of Leura - explore the antique shops.
- Enjoy a 2 course lunch at TerraFirma Gourmet Restaurant (J15L/J15Q).
- Travel through the site of the 2000 Olympic Games (J15T Telstra Stadium Tour - 40 minute tour with river cruise to Circular Quay).
- Finish the day with a relaxing cruise along the Parramatta River (J15R/J15L - tour finishes at Circular Quay).
- Visit Sydney Aquarium at Darling

Source: [http://www.aatkings.com/au/index.php?tour\\_code=J15](http://www.aatkings.com/au/index.php?tour_code=J15)

**B. Segregated paratransit hire**

- \$400 approx as directed
- Dependant on quality of driver
- Source: Quoted from 0200 taxi drivers

**Case Study Outcomes: for the people on the segregated paratransit tour:**

- Higher cost
- Loss of social interaction
- Feeling of being devalued

- not as valued as other tourists
- Loss of interpreted experience
- Loss of discounted product
- Lower quality experience
- Lack of choice

### **Case Study 2: Latent Tourism & Recreational Day Trip Demand**

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004)
- Bureau of Tourism Research/Tourism Research Australia (2003)
- Together with other research (Darcy 2004; 2006) identified transport as a significant constraint to travel generally, day trip and overnight trips
- People with disabilities only makeup 10% of travelling public but constitute 20% of the Australian population
- Only 1% identified that impairment was a constraint to travel
- Consistent with overseas research from the US, UK, NZ and EU as well as one off Australian studies
- I will not address the issue of airlines as Robin Banks will be addressing these issues tomorrow – personal note I haven't never felt as threatened in air travel as I have in the last 12 months. See Appendix 3.

- Current value of accessible tourism **\$3.4 billion annually**
- Estimated latent demand of **\$2bn annually**

Source: Darcy, S., Taylor, T., Dwyer, L., & Spur, R. (forthcoming). *Project # 90064: Visitor Accessibility in Urban Centres*. Gold Coast: Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre.

## **H. Lack of systematic inclusion of benefits of access**

There is a tremendous opportunity to instigate research into the benefits of improved accessibility for individuals, corporations and the community. Within the RIS process, it was far easier to document costs than to provide innovative methodologies to assess the relative benefits to stakeholders. Given the Commonwealth government's focus on improving employability of people with disabilities, funding should be provided for a benefits research project based on the directions outlined by:

Church, R. L., & Marston, J. R. (2003). Measuring Accessibility for People with a Disability. *Geographical Analysis*, 35(1), 83-97.

Kwan, M. P., Murray, A. T., O'Kelly, M. E., & Tiefelsdorf, M. (2003). Recent advances in accessibility research: Representation, methodology and applications. *Journal of Geographical Systems*, 5(1), 129-138.

Neufeldt, A. H., Watzke, J., Birch, G., & Buchner, D. (2007). Engaging the Business/Industrial Sector in Accessibility Research: Lessons in Bridge Building. *The Information Society*, 23(3), 169 - 181.

### **Case Study 3: Forest Coach Lines vs Paratransit taxi service trip to the city**

A simple personal case study indicates measurable economic benefits of accessible public transport over paratransit systems:

- \$4.15 from Terrey Hills to Queen Victoria building on Forest Coach Lines
- \$60+ wheelchair accessible taxi fare- \$30 NSW taxi transport subsidy = \$30. Equates to a \$25.85 benefit one way or a \$51.70 benefit return for a person working in the city. This daily benefit is the difference between having a job and not having a job when extrapolated by one working year **\$11,529.10**.
- Similarly on a special event route to Homebush and return is \$5 as opposed to \$70+ wheelchair accessible taxi - \$30 NSW taxi transport subsidy = \$40+. This equates to a \$35.00 benefit one way or \$70.00 benefit return for a person attending an event at Homebush. This is the difference between participating in recreational activities as participant, spectator or Volunteer.
- Price of citizenship? Priceless...
- Employment, education etc.
- Yet, there has been little research carried out into the benefits of accessibility to the individual and the community.
- Who is providing this evidence?

Philosophy of citizenship and social participation: economic rationalism is a short sighted approach

- The Commonwealth government has a focus on improving employment participation of people with disabilities by moving them from the disability support pension to employment
- Citizenship is more than employment and involves all spheres of life
- However, this policy requires series of positive supports if it hopes to achieve long-term careers for people with disabilities, particularly those of high support needs.
- Education, built environment, transport... are all required to complete the access circle
- As a society we must not individualise the effects of impairment
- Identify the socially constructed constraints that disabled people with impairment face and provide universal solutions that embrace all people
- A focus on citizenship will provide much longer-term benefits for the individual and the community than a narrow focus on economic rationalism

### **I. Service provision considerations for Improved Patronage**

When services have:

- Consistency
- Predictability
- Ease of use
- =
- Then people will use them. "This service is great, its cheaper and I'm meeting new people"

Provision of all public services (and public policy) should be judged on:

- Appropriateness
- Effectiveness
- Efficiency

However, when services are:

- Inconsistent
- Unpredictable
- Complex
- =
- Creates a sense of despair and low patronage. “Why bother as I have been continually disappointed?”

### **Citizenship is all about...**

- Rights +
- Empowerment +
- Inclusion +
- getting a life.
- It is at the core of what it is to be human Hutchison (1997:2)

## **Conclusion**

Transport is one of the foundation considerations for citizenship for people with disabilities along with: Health; Attendant care; Housing; Built environment; Education; and Personal Aids for disabled people. Only once these are in place can people with disabilities think about: Employment; Community involvement; Recreation & Tourism; Relationships and sexuality; and Dreams and desires. There is no doubt that since the introduction of the DDA Standards for Accessible Public Transport that there has been an overall improvement in accessibility of the public transport system. However, there are noticeable pockets of provision that are inconsistent, unpredictable and complex. In these areas, the accessibility of public transport remains absent, has not improved and, in some cases like the airlines, there has been an erosion of the rights of people with disability to maintain their citizenship rights.

## Appendix 1: Empirical Research on Disability, Transport and Tourism

Darcy, S. (2004). *Disabling Journeys: the Social Relations of Tourism for People with Impairments in Australia - an analysis of government tourism authorities and accommodation sector practices and discourses*. Unpublished Ph.D., University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney.  
<http://eprints.lib.uts.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2100/260/2/02whole.pdf>

The thesis was completed 2004 and has a number of relevant sections with regards to the review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport, which are now outlined:

- See Chapter 7 for an overview of the statistics of tourism and disability participation derived from major secondary data sources.
- See Chapter 8 pp184-201 for an understanding of the transport experiences of people with disabilities as they relate to tourism.
- See Chapter 10 pp266-285 for a review of the Regulatory Processes and Industry Responses to accessible tourism.

## Appendix 2: Setting a Research Agenda for Accessible Tourism - Commonwealth Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre

Darcy, S. (2006). *Setting a Research Agenda for Accessible Tourism*. Gold Coast: Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre.  
[http://www.crctourism.com.au/CRCBookshop/page.aspx?page\\_id=2&productID=473](http://www.crctourism.com.au/CRCBookshop/page.aspx?page_id=2&productID=473)

The research agenda identifies the importance of transport considerations to the development of an independent, dignified and equitable approach to accessible tourism.

## Appendix 3: Research Paper on the Airline Experiences People with Disabilities presented at US Conference

Darcy, S. (2007, 19-23 June). *Flying With Impairments: Improving Airline Practices By Understanding The Experiences Of People With Disabilities*. Paper presented at the Beating the Odds with Tourism Research! Las Vegas, Nevada. pp. 61-70.  
<http://www.ttra.com/>

The paper is appended.

## IMPROVING AIRLINE PRACTICES BY UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents an understanding of the air travel experiences of people with disabilities and draws implications for improving airline management practices. The theoretical foundation for the paper is based on applying a social approach to disability to the airline sector. The research design used a modified grounded and phenomenological qualitative approach that sought to understand the experiences of people with disabilities in their own words. These experiences were contrasted to the policies, procedures and operations of the three major Australian domestic airlines. The methods used to understand the experiences involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were part of a larger study into the tourism experiences of people with disabilities. Fifteen in-depth interviews were undertaken together with an analysis of the qualitative responses to a broader quantitative study on the same topic. The interviews were supplemented with complaint cases taken against airlines through the Australian *Disability Discrimination Act, 1992*. What emerged as the 'essence of experience' was that airline procedures created a newly disembodied experience that transformed a person's impairment into socially constructed disability. The social construction was a product of international air regulations, airline procedures, pressures brought about by the introduction of low-cost airlines into Australia and a new wave of occupational health and safety considerations. The resultant experience for many was one of heightened anxiety, helplessness and, in too many cases, humiliation.

Keywords: air travel; people with disabilities; regulation; lived experience

### INTRODUCTION

A number of authors note that tourism experiences for people with disabilities are more than access issues (Shelton & Tucker, 2005; Stumbo & Pegg, 2005; Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004). For people with disabilities a foundation of any tourism experience is having accessible destinations and locating appropriate accommodation from which to base oneself while traveling. Once this is determined in the travel-planning phase then people need to travel to the destination region. A greater proportion of people around the world now use air travel as their preferred mode of travel as it has been democratized through the advent of low-cost airlines (Doganis, 2005). Studies in Australia (Access For All Alliance (Hervey Bay) Inc, 2006; Darcy, 1998; Market and Communication Research, 2002) and overseas (Burnett & Bender-Baker, 2001; HarrisInteractive Market Research, 2003; Turco, Stumbo, & Garncarz, 1998) have shown that air travel creates a series of constraints for people with disabilities.

The applicability of antidiscrimination or disability specific legislation to air travel was first discussed by Reukema (1986) and placed in a leisure travel constraints context by Smith (1987). Yet, surprisingly few studies have specifically examined the air travel experiences of people with disabilities. Abeyratne (1995) presented the legislative responsibilities of carriers for people with disabilities and seniors while Driedger (1987) discuss the accessibility of the components of air travel. A great deal of specific policy has been released by the national government agencies responsible for regulating domestic and international carriers in the USA, Canada, the UK and the European Union. Despite these policies, a review of NewsBank and Factiva databases (1995-2007) revealed many hundreds

of articles worldwide outlining the ongoing constraints that people with disabilities encounter with air travel. In the Australian context, the anecdotal accounts have been validated by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (2006) complaints cases and Federal Court actions taken by people with disabilities against airports, airlines and the tourism industry generally. It is with this brief background that the paper explores the citizenship rights of people with disabilities and their experience in relation to one activity and industry - air travel. This paper presents an understanding of the air travel experiences of people with disabilities in Australia, reviews the current practice of Australia's three major domestic airlines and draws implications for improving airline management practices.

### THEORETICAL APPROACH

The theoretical foundation for the paper is based on applying a social approach to disability to the airline sector. Historically research about people with disabilities has not been framed from a disability perspective but those 'studying' disability, namely the medical profession (Barnes & Mercer, 1997). This perspective has been referred to as the *medical model* of disability, which defines disability as the problem of the individual stemming from their 'deficits' (Oliver, 1996). The resultant dominant social discourse views disability as a product of the 'abnormal body' rather than seeing a person's impairment as part of human diversity (Charlton, 1998; World Health Organization, 2001). The development of social approaches to disability over the last three decades has re-conceptualized disability from a 'personal tragedy' to a complex form of social oppression (Abberley, 1987). A social approach recognizes that it is not the person's impairment that is disabling but the *social environment* and prevailing 'hostile social attitudes' (Barnes, 1996, p. 43). The social model informs this research by providing an understanding that socially constructed relationships developed from three elements: the lived experiences of disabled people; identifying disability as the combination of impairment and socially constructed environments and attitudes; and a conceptual clarification focused on creating enabling environments in which people with disabilities can participate in an independent, equitable and dignified manner (Pfeiffer, 2001; Tregaskis, 2002). The social approach has been shown to be an appropriate framework from which to analyze the relative inclusion of Australians with disabilities in all areas of citizenship (Clear, 2000; Goggin & Newell, 2005).

This research recognizes that social structures are a product of historical development and cannot be divorced from their cultural context. The cultural context of air travel by people with disabilities in Australia, involves both a material and ideological transformation of the way people with impairments are treated. As Gleeson (1999, p. 13) notes in the Australian cultural context, attitudes towards institutional oppression of other groups in society have changed (e.g. women and indigenous), 'whilst continuing to ignore the material hardships and injustices to which they are subjected'. People with disabilities have been empowered by the Australian DDA where the legislation is in principle similar to legislation enacted in other Western nations and takes its overall direction from relevant United Nations declarations (1975; 1993; 2006). However, the way that nations implement the declarations is very different in each country (Parker, 2006; Quinn & Degener, 2002). In Australia, there have been issues with the relative empowerment of people with disabilities as the DDA is based primarily on a conciliated complaint system where no fault is ascribed. Only actions taken to the Federal Court of Australia, which is a cost jurisdiction, set a legal precedent that can be used in future actions. Where a case is conciliated, a similar complaint case brought the next day with a geographical or sectoral nexus and would have no knowledge of the previous case. Issues surrounding the implementation of disability human rights legislation in Australia have been thoroughly reviewed by others (Goggin & Newell, 2005; Handley, 2001; Parker, 2006).

A great deal can still be learnt from the complaint cases and relevant Federal Court actions through a review of the HREOC (2006) complaint cases.

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

The research design used a modified grounded and phenomenological qualitative approach that sought to understand the 'essence' of experience of people with disabilities in their own words. The methods used to understand the experiences of people with disabilities involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were part of a larger study into the tourism experiences of people with disabilities. Fifteen in-depth interviews were undertaken together with an analysis of the qualitative responses to a broader quantitative study on the same topic. To ensure confidentiality, all interviewees were given a pseudonym and the subsequent analysis was carried out through the Nvivo qualitative software package. The interviews were supplemented with a review of DDA complaint cases taken by people with disabilities against airlines. These experiences were contrasted against a review of the policies, procedures and operations of the three major Australian domestic airlines (Qantas, 2007; Virgin Blue, 2007; Jetstar, 2007) using their websites and other publicly available information that document their customer service procedures for people with disabilities. The length of this paper excludes and detailed examination of these documents. Popular press accounts of the airline experiences of people with disabilities or airline procedures were also used.

### **FINDINGS: PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES AND AIRLINE PRACTICES**

Emerging from the interviews was that the experience of air travel for people with disabilities could broadly be segmented into pre travel planning, boarding and disembarking, seat allocation, onboard personal care issues, equipment handling and customer service. Each of these areas is now examined.

#### **Pre travel planning**

People expressed frustration at the segregated systems of booking between the public and people with disabilities. Once a person has booked their airfare via any means (Internet, travel agent or packaged travel) they are required by all carriers to make phone contact to ensure that the carrier is able to guarantee their journey. 'It's a form of segregation that creates all sorts of problems when you're trying book with your friends or work colleagues. You secure the fares but then they (the airlines) can bump you for any number of reasons' (Interviewee). People spoke about being 'interrogated' as to their health and independence status, assistance animals, equipment needs and baggage. Low-cost airlines have introduced a 'independence criteria' that states that if the person, 'requires assistance with employing various safety features, including oxygen mask, seat belt and life jacket; evacuating from the aircraft, understanding the cabin crew, or administering medication, are required to travel with 'a carer'. Interestingly, these requirements have not been extended to the frail aged or children. As Paralympian Paul Nunnari, who had traveled independently for over a decade stated, 'this is an antiquated and ludicrous notion' (Metherall, 2006). This led to outrage amongst the disability community and brought about a policy back down by Virgin Blue where it 'will only require carers to accompany those weighing more than 130 kilograms' (Pelly, 2006). The rationale for the specifically stated 130kg has never been made clear.

Yet, even after these preplanning arrangements have been fully complied with an individual can still be refused the right to board based on an airline staff's perception of their relative independence (ABC Online News, 2006). Craig Wallace, a Commonwealth government employee and disability rights advocate who was well under 130kg, is currently pursuing a DDA complaint via the Federal Court after his experience of being refused by Virgin Blue check-in staff (Wallace, 2006). The New South Wales Disability Discrimination Legal Centre and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre are formulating a class action to pursue

at Federal Court level and have instigated a National Accessible Airlines Campaign (Banks, 2007). Apart from the challenge to independence, the requirement to travel with a 'carer' significantly adds to the cost of travel and only Qantas offers any form of discount for an attendant, which is only 10% off a standard domestic fare - well below that of the discounted fares (NICAN, 2007). Virgin Blue and Jetstar only guarantee the internet rate for the attendant. Of course, that is only the start of the costs, as the attendant would then require wages, accommodation and food for the duration of the trip. This significant cost constraint affects others already and impacts on their travel choices and duration of trips (Darcy, 2002). As Bob states, 'the cost of paying for an attendant is just prohibitive' (Interviewee). Yet, all three carriers are inclusive of assistance animals for the blind and other groups, and have no extra charge associated for their carriage.

A recent requirement by Qantas and Jetstar allows only one power wheelchair on narrow-bodied jets (e.g. 737) per flight. Yet, exceptions are made by Qantas for disability sporting events they sponsor. This creates a dual citizenship where multiple people can travel if they are elite sportspeople but not members of the public who both have power wheelchairs. This new regulation affects families and couples including 33% of those interviewed for this study, and any group of people with disabilities that requires air travel. One recent example was a higher education equity conference *Pathways 8* held at Wrestpoint Casino, Hobart. A significant number of attendees were wheelchair users who were students, equity officers, lecturers, partners and technology suppliers. The conference organisers reported a significant number of disruptions due to these new airline regulations, including cancellations of attendance (Roberts, 2006). Would this situation exist for a group of nondisabled cyclists and their equipment? Aircraft are designed to carry cargo yet there was a decision made by the airlines to allocate only one space for power wheelchairs.

#### **Boarding and disembarking**

The method of boarding and disembarking from the aircraft was a focus of criticism by all interviewees. This had to do with the boarding procedures and method of transfer onto the plane. Due to the aisles of aircraft not being wide enough to accommodate a standard wheelchair, people with disabilities must be transferred from their wheelchair before boarding onto an aisle chair. The aisle chairs are significantly smaller and narrower than a standard wheelchair, lack the provisions for self-propulsion and are not comfortable. In Justin's case, 'You get stuck in those bloody, shitty airport wheelchairs and you can't go anywhere. It might be for half-an-hour, and if you're stuck without access to your own chair, in one of those aisle chairs that you can't actually push around and go to the bathroom or get yourself a feed...it's a loss of independence...I'm self-catheterized, so if you don't get to the bathroom, you piss your pants; It's not the best way to be' (Interviewee).

The importance of staying in one's own wheelchair for as long as possible cannot be overstated. Yet, transfer to the aisle chair is only the beginning of what many people described as harrowing. The process involves more than discomfort in that it can directly affect a sense of self, 'my husband's self esteem plummets as we make our way through crowds waiting to board' (Interviewee). Qantas developed a hoist to assist in the transferring of people from their wheelchair to the aircraft seat but as a spokesperson for Tasmanians with Disabilities stated, 'People reported being humiliated when lifted in a swing hoist "like a sack of potatoes"' (Paine, 2005). No consultation had been undertaken prior to implementation. Qantas subsequently undertook a national consultation process with peak disability groups.

The boarding and disembarking process involves what people with impairments describe as *the first on, last off syndrome*. People with impairments are required to board aircraft as much as 45 minutes before the non-disabled. This is due to the confined nature of the aisles, the use of the aisle chair and the need to transfer people from the aisle chair to the aircraft seat (HREOC 2006). This does have the advantage of maintaining dignity and privacy

from the curiosity of non-disabled passengers given that the transfer process from aisle chair to aircraft seat can involve readjustment of clothing and seating position. Some people likened these experiences to 'being a freak in a circus' with everybody staring at them. After the aircraft has landed, people with impairments only disembark after non-disabled passengers. The length of time this takes is dependent upon the management issues discussed in the rest of the section. However, the result can be that people may spend an hour extra on an aircraft.

Most major Australian airports employ porters to assist people with impairments and older people to board and disembark from aircraft. In regional areas, this role falls to baggage handlers, cleaners or anyone else who is available. The level of expertise and training can vary tremendously. This creates a sense of helplessness that most people have overcome through their adjustments to a disabling society. When these situations arise, it creates a sense of loss. For some, they may never fly again. For others, their future travel choices are restricted to modes of transport where their independence and dignity can be maintained. Jenny also has a fear of flying and being told of the procedures for emergency egress does little to diminish her feelings of helplessness: 'They don't make you feel very good when they say to you, in the case of an emergency you are last out of the plane!' (Interviewee).

Safety issues formed part of a complaint case brought against Airlines of Tasmania in *McLean v. Airlines of Tasmania Pty Ltd* [1996 HREOC 77]. Mr. McLean sought to maintain his independence in regional air travel and alleged, '...that AT has discriminated against him, on the grounds of his disability, by imposing a condition of travel upon him that he must be accompanied by a support worker'. The Commissioner found that because McLean was a person with high support needs, he would be required to provide his own support person. It was also found that it would be an unjustifiable hardship for AT to provide such a person. The finding was due to safety reasons outlined in: the *Civil Aviation Authority Regulations*; the *Civil Aviation Orders*; and *Resolution 700 of the International Air Transport Commission*. It significantly restricts people with higher support needs from traveling independently. This places a further cost burden on the individual to hire an attendant and pay for their airfare even though they have an attendant to get them on and off the aircraft at each end of the journey. The finding was reinforced where it was found lawful to require a woman with epilepsy to be accompanied on a long international flight (HREOC 2006).

### **Seat allocation**

All members of the public contest the allocation of seats. However, as Tim suggests, 'not all the planes have got armrests that lift up. My very first flight they put me right down the very back. I had to squeeze all the way down the aisle to the back seat. Because I can't transfer myself, I have to be lifted over the armrest by the carer and the porters at the airport ...one gets on the legs, and the other on the back and transfers me across' (Interviewee). Due to aircraft design, the combination of the seat allocation and the flip-up armrests is essential for people who need assistance to transfer to aircraft seats. This is because only certain rows of seats have armrests that flip up to allow for unhindered transfer from the aisle chair to the seat. Without this, the porters must lift the person over the arm of the chair. This can cause injury to the person and is an occupational health and safety issue for porters. A number of the interviewees who require this consideration check and double check these details with airline booking authorities to the point that it becomes an obsessive-compulsive trait when traveling.

Many people expressed similar desires as Don to improve aircraft design 'I think for a start, the provision to stay in your own wheelchair within an aircraft would be brilliant' (Interviewee). While international air regulations are unlikely to allow people to travel in their wheelchairs, the requirement for all aircraft seats to have flip-up arms is sensible. This would alleviate the anxiety experienced when seeking assurance about the allocation of seat rows. Similarly, it was suggested that people with impairments could be allocated the bulkhead seating that has extra leg space. Yet, people with impairments are specifically excluded from

these seats as they double as emergency exits and it is argued that people with impairments pose a risk of blocking these areas during an emergency.

#### **Personal care issues and onboard toilets**

Once the correct seat has been located, the arms raised and the porters ready to transfer, there are other considerations for personal comfort. To the non-disabled these procedures may seem unusual, but to a person with lower body paralysis this is essential to protect skin condition against pressure. For this purpose, many people use specialist cushions. For a person like Tim who also has upper body paralysis, he uses a chest belt to provide stability while traveling in aircraft. This is because aircraft seatbelts are lap belts and do not provide upper body support. Air travel also has a series of health issues for the non-disabled that have been highlighted by the publicity about deep vein thrombosis. For people with impairments, any health issues need to be managed along with the inherent health issues arising from air travel. For many like Tony, ‘...I mean twenty-four hours in a plane is not good for you, I get swollen ankles and stuff like that’ (Interviewee). For Annabel the effects of rheumatoid arthritis make traveling an uncomfortable experience that is exacerbated by poor seating allocation, ‘...when I am taken on board, I am placed in the middle aisle... with no leg row...with a leg that couldn’t bend, I had nowhere to put my leg’ (Interviewee).

John states that a major issue of flying for many people was that ‘planes should have toilets that are wheelchair-accessible, both within Australia and overseas flights!’ (Interviewee). Even with the newer aircraft design that offers an accessible toilet, it is so far below the Australian Standard (2001) as to be effectively unusable for people with only moderate support needs. As Jane notes, ‘On previous overseas trips I have found getting to the toilet extremely difficult because of the tiny size of plane toilets. It’s put me right off traveling by plane’ (Interviewee). For people with higher support needs, the use of the toilet requires cabin staff to provide the onboard aisle chair on the limited number of plane that have accessible toilets. The person then has to be transferred by the cabin crew from the aircraft seat to the aisle chair. The aisle chair then has to be moved from the seating location into the accessible cubicle. Yet, even where accessible cubicles are provided instances have arisen where the aisle chair has not been aboard and the person had to be carried to the toilet, which led to embarrassment and physical discomfort (HREOC 2006).

The accessible cubicle consists of an extended curtain to offer privacy. On the flights without accessible toilets, or for people who cannot use the in-flight aisle chair, deal with continence management in different ways. It is a complex issue involving the mobility of the individual and their continence regime. Some people live within this constraint by not drinking and effectively dehydrating themselves during travel as in Jenny’s case, ‘I don’t think that I could get into a toilet in a plane...I have got a normal bladder function but I tend to hold on for a very long time’ (Interviewee). Air travel is generally dehydrating and without fluid intake, people risk more significant dehydration and other side effects (Rous & Ward, 1997). This provides a constraint on where they travel based on flight duration. For Kristy this has meant ‘flights we catch are only about an hour long so I do not have to access them (toilets)’ (Interviewee). Others cannot live with these restrictions and fly in fear of not being able to get to the toilet on aircraft, which creates a great deal of angst.

#### **Equipment handling/damage**

When undertaking air travel people take their equipment with them if they cannot hire equipment at the destination. Apart from the logistical considerations, some people reported ground staff reacting in less than a professional manner. For Jenny and John (Interviewee) this involved, ‘the airports generally freak out when we get there as we have a hoist, a commode, two portable ramps, both chairs and back pillows’. In other cases, there have been procedural issues about booking flights with extra equipment based on the *Air Navigation Act*. This has led to complaint cases about oxygen for people with respiratory impairments and

power wheelchair batteries for people with disabilities. Both cases involved a misunderstanding by ground crew as to the procedures to accommodate these inclusions. The resolution of these cases involved changes in booking policy and procedures to avoid undue delays or refusal of entry onto flights (HREOC 2006). The equipment issue also relates to the secure stowing of wheelchairs once a person has been transferred onto an aisle chair. As Tim explains, he has a procedure for ensuring a safer passage in the luggage hold for his wheelchair by disassembling the chair and taking the joystick control on board as 'That is the most vulnerable part of the chair...' (Interviewee).

Equipment damage is a major issue and if it occurs to their only wheelchair on the way to a destination the damage can end the holiday experience. Some people reported being unable to continue their trip as replacement equipment was not available at the destination. Further, airlines have a limit of \$1600 on damaged luggage and unless people have specifically taken out insurance on higher priced equipment, they are only covered for this limited amount. Only one of the three airlines noted this situation on their website and suggested that travelers have extra insurance for those items above this amount. Most power wheelchairs cost in excess of \$10,000 and damage can easily exceed this limit. The other associated issue is lost equipment. This issue made national headlines when a member of the Australian Parliament had his wheelchair lost twice in a week (ABC Local Radio, 2003; Hansard, 2003). Apart from the inconvenience, these losses can have a serious impact on the individuals dignity, where in the case of a Tasmanian paraplegic whose wheelchair had been placed on another flight, he had to crawl off the plane at a regional destination (Paine, 2005).

#### **Customer service**

The role of trained porters for transferring people was seen as essential by respondents. Once a person had been placed on an aisle chair it was ideal to board and seat them in as short a time as possible. Porters need to be available to assist when needed, need to be well versed in transfer techniques and need to be comfortable working with people with impairments. Without these prerequisites, the service offered to people with impairments might be unsatisfactory. In Don's case his experience of air travel was spoiled by a series of indiscretions, 'I found the airline was really quite rude, in that June and I went to get on the plane and he yelled down the corridor, 'I've got a couple of carry ons here'... That whole bad attitude to the customers' rights' (Interviewee). These experiences are directly related to the daily management practice at airports. Even after staff have undergone disability awareness training, major oversights can occur. Many people related experiences of arriving at a destination or on the way back home only to be left on the plane for a prolonged period before disembarking. The delays of up to three hours were caused by a breakdown of communication about people being on the flight and the lack of available porters to disembark passengers. These delays created further complications with missed connecting flights and ground transport. Sometimes this may be a result of periods of high demand with seasonal travel but has become far more acute since the introduction of low-cost airlines, which have a lower personnel to customer ratio. As Jetstar states 'we provide limited special assistance services to customers who require a wheelchair' as they do not have available staff to assist. Traditional carriers have been placed under greater cost pressures as market share is eroded and a first response is to reduce staff costs wherever possible. A number of interviewees reported that staff had told them of the reduction to porters where there used to be higher numbers per shift.

Most of the customer service experiences related to individuals with mobility and vision impairments who required assistance from the terminal to the aircraft or vice versa. There are also a number of significant group related issues involving people who were blind, which could have easily been avoided if a greater understanding of blind customer's needs were understood (Wade, 2002). Further, there was one relevant case of a person who had panic attacks where the travel insurance company refused to pay a claim believing the

agreement excluded this group. Upon conciliation, the company changed their decision and honored the insurance agreement (HREOC 2006). Lastly, Annabel offers an insight into the way air travel can be and should be each time a person with a disability travels, 'I have to say that I could find no fault at all with the treatment and the facilities provided by Qantas from the moment I checked in at the airport in Sydney' (Interviewee).

### APPLICATION OF RESULTS

What emerged from the findings was that air travel created a newly disembodied experience where people were unnecessarily cast back into a state of helplessness. There disembodiment involved their undue separation from their mobility aids, assistance animals and other enablers. For each individual, the development of these enablers is a response to their impairment that allows an equitable, independent and dignified citizenship. However, there were a series of airline practices that contributed towards a newly disembodied experience. These included: segregated booking procedures; boarding and disembarking practices that created feelings of dependency; emergency egress requirements that affect people with disabilities but not other groups; poor customer service practice; a reconstruction of the 'independent traveler' criteria; an imposition of a requirement for a 'carer'; inequitable cost imposition associated with the 'carer' requirement; subsequent restrictions on the assistance provided by airlines; introduction of occupational health and safety technology to compensate for the loss of personnel; restrictions on the number of power wheelchair users on a single flight due to the 'constraint' on the narrow bodied jets; and inconsistent approaches to procedures for oxygen and wheelchair batteries.

When the 'essence of experience' was compared to the review of the airline procedures, it became apparent that the experience was not the fault of the individual but was socially constructed. The social construction was a product of a lack of understanding of the needs of travelers with disabilities, international air regulations and airline procedures. While these issues have been noted for a number of years, two newer pressures have also become evident since 2000. First, the introduction of low-cost airlines into Australia has brought about radical change to traditional airline operations. Second, a subsequent bureaucratization of approaches to travelers with disabilities has gathered momentum in parallel to the first point. The outcome of these cumulative issues has led to a loss of equity, independence and dignity resulting in heightened anxiety, helplessness and, in too many cases, humiliation.

Australians with disabilities had been well served, albeit with ad hoc examples of poor customer service, by the Australian domestic two airline policy (Forsyth, 2005). The virtual duopoly had created a domestic airline sector that was regarded as expensive by international comparison. Yet, under this system people with disabilities had not experienced a systemic attack on their rights to travel independently. The advent of low-cost airlines has had a significant impact on the Australian domestic and international air carrier structures generally (Graham & Vowles, 2006). People with disabilities have not escaped the impacts of these structural changes where it is no coincidence that, 'The downgrading of policy in relation to people with disabilities has coincided with increasing competition in the airline industry,' (Paine, 2005). While not fully presented in this paper, there is a substantial difference to the level of service offered by the carriers with Qantas (traditional cost airline) providing a much higher level of service than Jetstar or Virgin Blue. Further, Qantas have taken a strategic consultative approach than Jetstar or Virgin Blue. While Qantas operations are not without ongoing issues their corporate approach is far more inclusive than the other carriers are.

### CONCLUSIONS

The paper has highlighted how the air travel experiences of people with disabilities create a disembodied experience resulting in heightened anxiety, helplessness and

humiliation. The airline industry could reduce the 'essence of these experiences' through improved management practices based on a greater understanding of the social approaches to disability that advocate equity, independence and dignity. These management practices would not contravene essential international safety regulations but would require an organizational commitment to this market group. Travel is an essential component to citizenship and the most recent UN *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* suggests that airlines will need to engage with these principles so as to not contravene international human rights agreements (United Nations, 2006). However, as evidenced in this paper, there is already a clash of human rights principles with the market pressures brought about by the globalization of the international airline industry and the increasing market share of low-cost airlines.

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